

Secrecy Shrouds Flying Group

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Copley News Service

TAIPEI, Formosa — The newly recruited civilian American fighter pilot told me he was on air strikes against North Viet Nam:

"My current mission is so secret, I don't know what I'm doing."

Although mystery shrouds the actions of the group, it is now known that the Nationalist Chinese government has secretly recruited 100 civilian Americans to fly missions in embattled Southeast Asia.

One source hinted that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency will pick up the tab for pilots' salaries.

The entire operation is a cloak and dagger production.

The new "Flying Tigers" are flying for a mysterious organization called "Air America."

Top-ranking U.S. military officers here deny any knowledge of the outfit.

Local aviation officials are noncommittal.

An official of the Chinese Civil Air Transport (CAT), the government international airline, said Air America "is simply a transport service." He stated that it operates under Air Asia which also oversees CAT.

If this is true, why all the secrecy?

It suggests that Air America is engaged in flying sensitive support missions to back up recent U.S. moves in South Viet Nam and Laos. Many of the planes assertedly operate from fields near Vientiane, Laos.

A source "inside" Air America said the group "flies cargo and other things" on orders from Taipei.

Maintenance and support of the planes come from a Nationalist Chinese base at Tainan.

The pilots are sent from Taipei to Vientiane after approximately a week of briefings and tough physical examinations.

One pilot told me that although he had extensive flying experience and had passed his Federal Aviation Agency tests weeks before, he "nearly flunked the examination" given him here.

The pilots' salaries are far higher than average and their pay is boosted considerably by accomplishing certain "project" flights.

"The Americans are flown here by first-class civilian air transportation. They eat and sleep in the best hotels in Taipei; expenses paid. They pilot, among others, C43 and C46 aircraft. The planes bear no markings," my informant said.

The final lid on the operation is a ruling that domestic aircraft landing in Tainan

are required to drape their windows.

Several Asian governments in the past have accused the United States of working through Nationalist China to support rebel movements within their borders.

Burma made this complaint in 1952.

The United States denied the accusation but later admitted involvement.

Indonesia in 1955 shot down a U.S. B56 piloted by Allan L. Pope, an American. He had worked for CAT, flying supplies to the French Forces in Viet Nam.

Is Air America involved in secret operations in Viet Nam, Cambodia, Laos? Does it simply fly cargo?

These questions are unanswered.

There is an "invisible shield" around Air America.

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